

# Something to Write Home About

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Summary: A short story chronicling Sonic's adventures in a hidden mountain base when Slasher leaves him alone. Soon Sonic is in way over his head. Rather tongue-in-cheek.

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By K. M.

Hollar

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## Prologue

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The sun was settling into the west, transforming the sky into a furnace of liquid gold and crimson, the wispy mare's tails glowing orange and neon pink. The air above the forest was warm and smelled delightfully of green leaves and pine sap, of moist earth and growing things.

A large bird circled slowly in the evening sky, its huge wings hardly stirring. A moment's observation revealed that its tail was far too

long and thin to be a bird's, and that it's height above the earth made it appear small. As it tilted for a moment in it's circle, the small figure on its back came into view; crouched low between the great wings and hardly visible.

"There's a settlement in the valley," Slasher told her rider. She was a large, brown velociraptor, her color shading to yellow ochre beneath, and her back was marked with broad chocolate-brown stripes. She flew with her forearms tucked against her chest, out of the way.

"A settlement?" asked her rider. "Where?" He was a blue hedgehog with a tanned face, belly and arms. His sneakers, buried from view beneath Slasher's wings, were red with a white stripe around them. He wore a bulky area-scanner on a strap around his neck, the weight of which made him slump forward a bit.

The winged velociraptor unfolded a hand and pointed down and right. "Where the valley is deepest and darkest."

The hedgehog looked, squinting in the fading light, but could see nothing but trees. "I don't see it. How do you know it's there?"

"I can smell it," she replied. "I don't suppose your nose is as sensitive as mine. I can smell the difference in the woods." She sniffed thoughtfully. "Buildings ... a clearing ... exhaust?"

"You mean like from a generator?"

"Possibly. The village we're looking for, however, is supposed to use no machinery at all ... they live off the land. I think you ought to scan the area and see what turns up."

Sonic lifted the scanner in one hand, but could not balance well enough to free his other hand from his hold on the feathery wing. He stared helplessly at the box in his hand for a moment. With sudden insight, he pressed the power button with his nose, flipped up the screen with his teeth and adjusted the range switch by the same method. Vaguely proud of himself, he watched the screen as the gadget began scanning.

A moment later he whistled softly through his teeth and exclaimed, "That ain't no Freedom Fighter village, Slash."

"What is it, then?" she replied, looking back at him with one green eye.

"It looks like a ..." he paused, trying to find the word for the object in the scanner. "... a base," he finished lamely. "Or a fortress or ..."

Slasher reached up, took the scanner and looked for herself. After a second she made a questioning sound in her throat. "Strange. I don't remember any outposts this far from Robotropolis." Indeed, the two were deep in the Dark Mountains, fifty miles south of Packbell's secret base. There was said to be a Freedom Fighter village somewhere in the area, and the two were on a quest to find them.

But if this was a village it was a very strange one. The scanner detected no life-forms, but the technology readings were high. "Do

you think it's R.K. or Mecha?" Sonic murmured.

"Could be," his mount replied dubiously. "Stay here and I'll check it out."

Obviously Sonic couldn't remain suspended in mid-air--she meant for him to stay on her back after they had landed.

The big creature dropped a wing and spiraled down toward the forest.

\* \* \*

It had been a warm day on the Floating Island. The ground was giving back the sun's heat as Knuckles walked along a thin sandy path. The trees and saplings planted during the winter were leafing out nicely, and a riot of flowers and plants had sprang to life out of the bare ground, their seeds untouched by the terbium blight. It was a welcome surprise to see so much green. It gave the discouraged guardian hope that the island would grow back sooner than he had expected. The air had lost the dead feeling and smelled of life once more.

He was heading for his big teleporter, intending to go down to Hidden Palace for a while. He had no real objective in mind; perhaps read for a while, or work on interpreting the inscriptions on the super emerald pedestals, which had been his favorite pastime for a week. At any rate, hanging around Hidden Palace was something he did when bored.

A twig snapped somewhere to his rear. He glanced back but saw no one. He kept walking. There was nothing on his island he feared; it was probably one of the Chaotix.

Another twig crunched, then a swish of branches being pushed against. Again he looked about him and called, "Who's there?" His voice held the exasperation of a person upon whom many practical jokes have been played. No answer. "Espio, if that's you I'll punch you into next week!" he threatened. Still no reply. He resumed walking.

There were no more sounds until he reached the teleporter and was pulling away the palm branches that concealed it. Then there came a muffled crash and squeak from a nearby tree, and a scuffling, scurrying sound. The scarlet echidna snapped erect and looked, his experienced eyes sifting through the undergrowth for motion. There came a flash of sun on metal.

In a trice Knuckles had leaped into the bushes and was searching for whoever it was, fists clenched and eyes burning. There was a trespasser on his island and he didn't like it. He discovered the tracks of tennis shoes and a patch in the grass where someone had fallen full-length, but the culprit was gone. He searched in circles around the area, but there were no footprints leading to or from the tree. His first thought was Tails, but no, the fox wouldn't be here and spying on him, of all things.

Irked, he placed his hands on his hips and hollered, "I know you're out there! In case you're wondering, I'm headed for Hidden Palace! Happy now?" He snorted in disgust, stepped onto the teleporter and warped away.

The trees were quiet for a minute. Then a creature stirred in the highest branches of the big tree; it was hanging upside down, wings covering its body. "Gosh," it murmured softly. "I barely escaped with my hide that time!" Then it dropped from the branch, opened it's wings and flew away.

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"Dear Sally and everybody else,

"Hiya! I'm writing from beside a campfire in the woods up here. Slasher is off scouting. I was bored, so I decided to give you guys an update.

"We cruised all through the Dark Mountains today, and didn't find a thing til this evening. My scanner picked up this really weird settlement. I guess that's what it was. It ain't nothin of the freedom fighter's, tho. We checked. No lifeforms. High technology. So Slshr landed and we did some on-foot snoopin.

"We didn't find much. Whatever it is is built funny. Way back in the side of a hill, kinda under the trees. There was a heavy-duty fence around it. We're talkin electrified, razor wire, the whole nine yards. Slash saw what she thought were videocameras in the trees, so we didn't jump it. There were red-and-white signs all over, too, saying stuff like, 'danger', 'stay out, stay alive', 'tresspassers will be shot, survivors will be shot again', 'tresspassers will be persecuted' (not 'prosecuted'--we looked) and 'beware of robots'. The place looked deserted, but it was pry built way underground, so who knows. The fence was on, anyhow.

"Not long ago we heard a sound. You know, kind of a metallic grinding, screeching sound, like a rusty garage door opening. Slsh went to investigate. I talked like a Dutch uncle to let me go, but she insisted. You don't argue with Slshr when she insists. So here I sit, alone in the dark, with a computer in my lap that has a smashed mosquito on the screen. (A real mosquito--they're bad up here), wishing I were a million miles away from here, or at least sneaking along with Slsh. I'll play the pinball game I found on here til she gets back, the tell you what happens.

"Later ...

"Slsh got back. She said the front of that building had opened up and a vehicle drove out and parked. Then the doors closed. Slsh sneaked up and checked it out. Just a hover transport, nothing special. No cargo. No driver, either. It did have a funny antenna on top, like it was remote controlled. So there must be somebody in that place.

"Peace out.

"Sonic."

\* \* \*

That evening, as Sonic dozed beneath Slasher's wing, the foul odor of mosquito repellant hanging about them, Slasher's ears caught another

strange sound.

Her head jerked up, eyes immediately taking in the dying campfire, the dim tree trunks surrounding the clearing and the patch of night sky above them. Her nose detected nothing unusual, deadened as it was by the repellent, and there was no breeze. But from somewhere out in the darkness came the soft, hoarse whine of a jet engine far off. She cocked her narrow head toward the sky, then instinctively drew herself together, pressing her wing about Sonic to shield him.

A single yellow light traced a path through the top of the heavens, small and moving fast. The big raptor watched it with one green eye. Its course was steady. It flew due west until it finally passed out of sight and hearing.

Slasher remained alert for a long time afterward, but it did not return. Eastward lay the strange outpost, and westward lay the Mobitropolis valley. They had come from that direction themselves the day before. A sense of foreboding settled on the raptor's heart--something was about to happen. She had heard those same engines before, and the memory was not pleasant.

\* \* \*

As the night deepened, a small, dark figure in a tree many many miles from the Dark Mountains clicked on a communicator and whispered, "You rang?"

"Yes," came the reply--hissing and digital. "I am on my way to you-know-where. How have you fared?"

"Okay, I guess," the small figure replied softly.

"You guess?" the com growled.

"Why, did you want to guess first?"

"Pip ..."

"Okay, okay. I didn't learn much toady, except that Knuckles uses a teleporter to get to Hidden Palace."

"That's all?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies."

There was a moment of silence as the other speaker got ahold of himself. "We already know that he uses a teleporter," he said at last. "It's common knowledge!" A deep sigh. "What kind of teleporter was it?"

"Donno. It's got a blue glass stand and a white lens. There's no controls I can see."

"Even worse. One of his own untrackable devices. Well, Metal Sonic is the only one to know Hidden Palace's location, and I am not going to wander that cursed island again! Remain there a week. If you have learned nothing by that time, return to the base. You are too important to me to lose."

"Cool, thanks!"

"Literally don't mention it. I will contact you later. NEVER try to contact me."

"Yeah, I know. Talk to you later."

A hiss. "Goodbye ... or as Sonic says, 'Peace out'."

The figure shivered as the com clicked off. "Man, he gives me the creeps!" she whispered. "I guess it just goes with the job description."

\* \* \*

The next morning in Knothole was nothing new. It was a bit quiet without Sonic and Slasher, but other than that, very normal.

Tails was rather lost without his hero to follow around. After breakfast, he sat on a tree stump and gazed forlornly at the village around him, ears and tails drooping, Sally, who happened to be walking by, saw him and seated herself beside him. "What's the matter, Tails?" she asked, rubbing his back.

He cupped his chin in his hands. "Nothin'."

"You miss Sonic?"

"Uh-huh."

"He'll be back in a few days, you know."

"I know." The young fox turned his forlorn eyes on her. "But I miss him anyway."

"I do, too," Sally murmured. They said nothing for a moment. Then Sally stood and said, "I've got some computer stuff to do. You want to come with me?"

"Sure." Tails obligingly slid off the stump and followed her across the village.

Suddenly, for no reason at all, he felt almost commanded to step into the forest for a moment. "I'll be right back, Sally," he said, then dashed off toward the nearby wall of trees. She didn't notice him.

His steps slowed as he entered the woods. It was dark and mysterious under the trees, the light green and gold. The smell of damp earth rose to his sensitive nose as he walked. Why had he wanted to come out here? Some weird hope of finding Sonic? He kept moving.

A dark figure sprang from behind a tree, bigger than he and frightening. He froze for an instant, but before he could run a heavy hand clamped down over his mouth and another closed on his shoulder. They were metal hands, icy cold. He was yanked around and pinned savagely against a tree trunk. Two glowing green crescents stared into his eyes.

"Do not struggle or cry out," the crimson robot ordered quietly. "You

will not be harmed seriously. Simply answer my questions. Will you comply?"

Tails's heart was ricocheting about his ribcage, his adrenaline pumping. There was nothing he could do--the robot was far stronger than he and could break his neck in an instant. He nodded, terrified.

"Where are the seven chaos emeralds?"

The hand released his mouth. He gasped, then whimpered, "I don't know."

Robo Knux slammed him hard against the tree. "You know. Where are they?"

"I don't know," Tails choked, the breath nearly gone from his lungs. "We don't have 'em--haven't had 'em in years--"

Another bone-jarring body slam against the trunk. "How does Sonic become hyper?"

Tails coughed and gulped for air. "Supers," he gasped.

"You mean he has the seven super emeralds?" Robo Knux questioned furiously.

Tails couldn't speak and only nodded, quite sure he was going to be murdered.

"Where are they?"

"Sonic has 'em," the fox managed, closing his eyes. He couldn't bear to look at the green eyes any more.

"Where is Sonic?"

"On a mission."

"Where?"

"I don't know!" Tails cried, expecting to be crushed again. Instead the robot growled, "I should have questioned Sally." He released Tails and the fox collapsed in a heap on the ground. "Goodbye, Tails," he crooned sarcastically.

When Tails looked around again, Robo Knux was nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

"Oh great," Slasher said. In her hands was the little laptop; she was checking for new messages. "Here's one from Sally, urgent status. Listen, Sonic."

"Slasher, Sonic, we're in trouble. Tails came tearing into the village a little bit ago, terrified. His right shoulder was badly bruised. He said that Robo Knux attacked him and asked him the whereabouts of the chaos emeralds, of the supers, and of you, Sonic. He won't set foot outside now. We need you to come home. If that robot is hanging about, we need our two defensive fighters. Please

come at once!"

Slasher and Sonic looked at each other. Sonic's eyes were flaming, his hands clenched at his sides. "He hurt Tails," he snarled softly.

"I saw Robo Knux flying last night," Slasher said, shaking her head. "I didn't think he would attack the village ..."

"Tails, Slash. He attacked Tails."

Silence a moment as Slasher turned off the computer. "Looks like we're headed home. But I think our robot friend is somehow affiliated with that strange outpost out there."

"'Beware of robots'," Sonic quoted thoughtfully. "Beware of himself, he means!"

"Yeah. Too bad we can't keep an eye on it ..." Slasher sideeyed him.

He looked keenly at her, guessing what she meant. "You mean somebody goes home and somebody hangs out here?"

"What do you think?"

"Who did you have in mind?"

"I figured I'd go home. I'm bigger and stronger than R.K., and he's never come up against me in combat like he has you. Nothing like the unknown opponent to breed respect."

"True." Sonic looked down for a moment. "You'll make sure Tails is okay?"

"That's why I wanted to go." Slasher knelt and slung her knapsack onto her back. Sonic watched her. "How long before you come back?"

"Oh, depends. Maybe a week, maybe sooner. If you need me before then, whistle." She motioned toward the small silver whistle that hung on a chain around his neck.

He grinned and touched it. "Sure. Mind if I scout around for that village?"

"I don't care. Just don't get lost. These mountains are confusing."

"Oh, I won't go far."

"Don't get caught."

"Don't worry. I've got my belt."

"That's exactly why I'm worried. You rely on that thing too much. There are times when power won't save you."

"Yeah yeah yeah."

"See you later." The big raptor leaped into the air, unfurled her



wings and beat her way skyward. Sonic watched her go, then smiled to himself. "Time for some expert snooping!" he muttered, then whirled and tore away in the direction of the strange base.

\* \* \*

The crimson robot was crouched in the rocks three miles north of Knothole, completely screened from all sides. He had buzzed his contact on the Floating Island and was waiting for her to reply. After a moment the communicator clicked and and she said, "You rang?"

"Yes. Have you learned anything?"

"Aside from the fact that I'm fleeing Knuckles?"

"Pip, what on Mobius have you done now?"

"I heard him talking to these guys called the Chaotix, so I snuck up and listened. But he happened to look up and saw me. I'm flying with everything I've got! Oops, hang on, they're shooting at me."

A long period of silence. Robo Knux put a hand to his forehead and muttered, "The little wretch! She will spoil everything!"

Another ten minutes passed before Pip's voice came again, panting and breathless. "Sorry."

"Are you secure?"

"For the moment. I had to stop flying and just plain ol' run. I'm hiding in a metal culvert that goes under the trail and I'm soaked."

"It's better than being dead."

"I suppose. Hey, I did learn something!"

"What?"

"Sonic has miniatures of the super emeralds in some belt of his. That's what he uses to become hyper."

"A belt, eh?"

"That's what they said."

"Well well." Robo Knux was silent for a moment, thinking. "Pip, return to base as soon as you can. If the guardian knows of your presence, there is no point in remaining there."

"Yes sir!"

\* \* \*

Sonic stood on the ridge above the valley, the heavy scanner in his hands. Nothing down there but the outpost. He turned his back on it and gazed down into the canyon on the other side of the ridge. The mountains all about fell steeply down in a large, skinny valley with a river running through it. It was much deeper than the outpost

valley.

He set out in a lope along the top of the ridge, scanning as he went. He had already checked out the outpost--no sign of life, nothing interesting. At the moment he needed some action, and didn't feel like sneaking about. A hidden Freedom Fighter village sounded much more inviting.

A series of light green dots appeared on the screen. Sonic stopped and let it scan thoroughly. Something near the bottom of the valley--could be huts, or could be rocks or large trees. It bore investigating, whatever it was. Without a second thought he turned and tore down the steep mountainside.

If he had waited a second longer and looked toward the west, he would have seen a small creature fly over the far ridge and sweep down into the valley, wings glinting metallically in the sun with each beat. It went straight for the outpost and vanished among the trees.

\* \* \*

8:30 PM, or 20:30 Mobian Standard Time.

"Dear Sally, Slasher and everybody,

"Hiya! Sonic here. Just thought I'd letcha no I looked for those FFs and no luck. Saw something I thought was em, but it was just a ruined old settlement made of rock. No life anywhere up here, seems like. "Hows Tails? Tell him I said hi. You guys found RK yet, or has he cleared out? I hope he cleared out. It sure is quiet up here. I'll go check out the base later--pry tomorrow, cause Im pretty tired now. Peace out.

"Sonic."

\* \* \*

The blue hedgehog curled up in his sleeping bag and slept like a log. About midnight, two things happened that he slept right through.

A shadow slunk through the forest, silent but for the occasional crunch of dry leaves underfoot. Her black color made her nearly invisible, but the starlight occasionally touched the metal on her with startling glints. She was looking for Sonic; she knew his general location, but was not sure exactly where he was. She paused often to scrutinize the shadows beneath the trees with her superb night-vision.

Presently she spied him and stopped, listening to ascertain if her was asleep or not. A long moment passed. Finally, reassured, she crept forward and knelt beside him. Quickly she put out a hand and unzipped the side of the sleeping bag, then reached in a hand. She froze, fingers encountering the belt. "It's true!" she whispered.

Carefully she reached for the clasp and fumbled with it, moving a fraction of an inch at a time, afraid of awakening the hedgehog. Finally she felt the clasp give. Now for the tricky part; pulling it out from under him.

She lifted the top of the sleeping bag a bit and was startled to see the brilliant glow of the super emeralds. The belt, once unclasped, became visible. She looked at the rainbow of jewels for a long moment, then set her teeth and began to ease it out from under the hedgehog's body. Sonic didn't stir, even when the stranger jerked the buckle under his back. It looped twice around the metal eye, and once there the end snapped onto the backside of the belt. All at once it became invisible in the figure's hands. "Cool," she breathed softly, running her hands over the invisible leather.

A sound reached her ears--a distant jet engine. She stood, moved into the open and looked into the starry sky. After a moment a single golden light traced across the heavens, heading for the base. "He's back," the stranger whispered, then turned and trotted back in the direction of the outpost to meet him, the invisible belt slung over one shoulder.

\* \* \*

Sonic awoke the next morning, donned his shoes, ate breakfast and put away his sleeping bag without noticing his belt was missing. He had worn it so long he didn't feel it anymore, and so didn't realize it was gone.

He was looking forward to seriously exploring the mysterious outpost. He had not gone exploring in dangerous places since Robotropolis, and was itching to try his speed and wit against danger.

The sun had not yet climbed high enough to peer down into the valley when Sonic jumped the electric fence. This he accomplished by climbing a tree, walking out on a limb that protruded over the top of the fence, then jumping down inside. He had to be creative when scaling dangerous obstacles, and was well acquainted with the damage razor wire could inflict. The fading scars on his legs gave testimony of that.

The hedgehog stepped into a nearby grove of trees and stood still, scoping out the area. There was two hundred feet of open, grassy space between the spot where he stood and the rounded, whitewashed wall of the outpost, and the ground sloped slightly uphill. His experienced eyes noted the jumbles of boulders here and there on the slope, providing cover for himself--and enemies. Not too far away, the other side of the fence was hidden in a thick wall of pine trees. He could either go along the fence, concealed from all eyes, or go straight up the hill, ducking from rock to rock. Being his bold, impetuous self, he chose the open way.

Zigzagging across the hillside was fun at first, but he felt rather foolish by the time he reached the building. Birds sang all about him in the forest, the air was clean with the tang of pines, and he was unchallenged, seemingly unnoticed. What if the place was abandoned?

This doubt grew in his mind as he examined the structure from all sides. The back was half-buried in the hillside and thickly enclosed with forest. The front's only feature were the two giant silver doors, tightly locked and impenetrable. Sonic approached them gingerly and pressed his ear to one. He could hear a very faint hum from within the building; a generator for the fences? He listened for a long time, but could hear nothing else. Discouraged, he backed off

and stood with his hands on his hips. Perhaps he could break in as hyper ...

As this thought crossed his mind, one of the grey doors clicked loudly and swung outward a few inches, as if suddenly unlatched. This was so bizarre he fled to the protection of a nearby boulder and watched from behind it. Nothing. No attack, no one going in or out, \_no good reason for it to have opened\_!

After an age of waiting and watching, his curiosity began to get the better of him. Assuming he could use his non-existent belt if anything happened, Sonic trotted up to the door and looked in.

The air was dark, cold and musty. The hum he had detected before was more pronounced; definitely a generator. Suddenly bold, he thrust the door open, leaned in and called, "Hello?"

"Hello!" someone replied from right beside him. Immediately a hand closed on his neck and yanked him into the building. The door slammed shut behind him as if from a kick, and the lights flashed on.

Two hands were about his neck now, holding just tight enough to keep him from struggling. Facing the wall as he was, he could see nothing. "Who is it?" he gasped, grabbing at the hands. Metal hands. Giant spikes on the knuckles. "Is that--gasp--Robo Knux?"

"Brilliant, Einstein," came the cold robotic voice. "Don't struggle, please. It would be a shame if I were forced to tighten my grip. Pip, the ropes, if you please."

Sonic felt another pair of hands that dragged them behind his back. There was a faint ropy rustle as his hands were bound. "Need your henchman's help to contain me, eh?" Sonic snarled. "Chick-en!"

"Silence," commanded the robot behind him. He released his prisoner unexpectedly, and Sonic whirled to face him.

The room was large, round, empty and painted white. Everything was white, like inside a laboratory. Robo Knux's bright crimson hull stood out against it like a sore, red thumb, his green eyes flashing like beacons in glee. Beside him stood a small black bat with robotized wings, gazing at Sonic with large, innocent eyes.

"Who're you?" Sonic snapped.

"I'm Pip," she replied, touching a winged hand briefly to her chest. "Hi there."

Sonic dimly sensed the contrast between the two--Pip was not evil. He probably would have liked her under any other circumstances. At the moment, however, if she was on R.K.'s side, she was no friend of his.

"What do you want?" Sonic asked of them both, trying to appear fearless, even with his hands bound behind him.

A few things," said Robo Knux. "I need to ask you a few questions. Will you come with me?"

"No!" Sonic snarled, leaping back. "I know how you question prisoners!"

The robot paced forward and Sonic danced back. "If that's how you want to play it, twinkletoes," the robot growled, and sprang.

The scuffle was pitifully brief. Sonic could run, but he couldn't fight without his hands. Robo Knux cornered him, tripped him up and punched him several times. The hedgehog groaned and collapsed, playing 'possum. The robot picked him up and ordered, "Pip, open the door, please." The bat ran to open a door in the inside wall, and R.K. strode through.

Sonic, considerably limper than was necessary, opened one eye. They seemed to be moving down a dark passage with an earthen floor and wooden struts supporting the ceiling. Slasher was right-- the base continued on back into the mountainside. The air reeked of a chemical-smell, something like ammonia. The generator noise grew louder, then faded behind them--they must have passed the room that housed it. Pip was somewhere nearby--he could hear her footsteps--but she was out of his range of vision.

The robot halted. A door off to the right was opened, and Sonic was carried through. It was dark. All that was in this room was a large chair, like a dentist's chair, with a light above it.

Sonic came to life and threw himself out of the robot's arms. He landed on his knees, struggled to his feet somehow and bolted.

The door was standing open. He made for it with all his panic-fury strength, but as he passed through it a thunderbolt seemed to fall from the sky and collide with his skull.

He came to in the chair, head pounding like a jackhammer. He tried to move a hand to see if he were bleeding, but could not; his wrists were bound to the arms of the chair. His feet were also tied down. It seemed quiet--his ringing ears made out nothing but the grinding of the generators. He decided to lie still for the time being and let the life ooze back into him.

A icy metal hand touched his face. Sonic jumped convulsively and realized he had closed his eyes. To his relief it was only the bat, not Robo Knux. "What are you doing?" he growled, trying to conceal his fear.

"Shh," she replied. "You've got a nasty bump on your head."

"What hit me?"

Pip smiled. "That was my baseball bat. Sorry. The door was rigged for whoever tried to exit."

Sonic stared at her for a moment, then asked, "What are you going to do to me?"

She shrugged. "He'll question you, I don't know what about. I think he'll let you go once he's done."

"How do you know? He might murder me just for the fun of it."

"He's in a good mood today. Okay, look straight up at the light. I've got to clamp your head down."

"No way!" Sonic exclaimed.

Pip shook her head. "Orders is orders. It won't hurt. It's just to hold you still." She began to crank something on the side of the chair, and two padded plungers, like the jaws of a vice, began to move together on either side of his head. They closed relentlessly until his head was held firmly in place. "There," she said, looking at him. "All comfy?"

"You bet," Sonic said through clenched teeth. His headache intensified with the added pressure.

She nodded. "Good. See ya later." She turned and walked away. Sonic listened as she left the room, then gave a good, hearty struggle, but his bonds were metal and unbreakable. He could hardly move at all with his head held between the jaws of the vice. There was nothing to do but wait, which he did, grimly.

He did not wait long. Presently the clanking footsteps of Robo Knuckles entered the room. The robot did not immediately approach him; he remained out of Sonic's sight for a short while, tinkering with something. After a while there came the squeak of the wheels of some nameless contraption, which Robo Knux pushed up beside the chair. All Sonic could see of it was a low tray with sharp, diabolical instruments set on it. They appeared to be surgical tools.

Sonic's heart quailed as he looked up at the robot, who was solemnly donning rubber gloves over his silver hands. Holes had been cut in them for his knuclaws, Sonic noticed. He held his tongue, however, and let the robot speak first. It gave the impression he was not afraid.

Robo Knux took his time about smoothing the gloves, then carefully straightened the instruments on the tray, deliberately wreaking psychological havoc on his victim. Silent torture was something he had studied extensively under Packbell, for the anticipation of punishment, he learned, was often worse than the thing itself.

At last he said, "Hello, Sonic. Are you ready for me to begin the questioning?"

"Shoot," Sonic muttered.

"Right," the robot said. Examining the claws on his right hand, he said, "Is it true that your belt contains the seven Super Emeralds?"

Sonic stiffened in shock. How had he found out about the belt? Helpless as he was, he could not stop the robot from taking it from him.

Robo Knux saw the consternation in his prisoner's face and smiled as only a robot could. "It IS true, then." He put out a hand and pawed at Sonic's waist, feeling for the belt. Sonic cringed and shuddered at the cold, rubbery touch, but could do nothing.

Suddenly they both realized something; Robo Knux was not finding what he sought. The two looked at each other, the robot accusingly and Sonic with a relieved horror--relief that Robo Knux could not take it, and horror that it was not there. Had he taken it off? When? He had had it the night before--

"Where is it?" Robo Knux growled.

Sonic tried to shake his head, remembered the vice and said, "I don't know!"

"Yes, you do. Where is it?"

"I don't know, seriously!" Sonic insisted. "I had it last night--it should be there!" Why was he trying to convince the robot? No, he was trying to convince himself that it was there-- HAD to be there--

"Well, it's not," said the robot, folding his arms. "I will force you to relinquish it!"

With one hand he picked up one of the sharp tools, and with the other he reached over and pried Sonic's jaws open. "You could use a good teeth-cleaning," Robo Knux said cruelly. "When you leave this room you will have the cleanest teeth on Mobius! Do not move or you will be injured." This last was stated in such a way as to dare Sonic to disobey him. Then he set to work with all the energy of a prospector digging for gold.

\* \* \*

Hours later, Sonic lay on his back on the cold floor of a jail cell, eyes closed, suffering. Robo Knux had happened across what he claimed was a cavity and proceeded to drill it out without Novocaine.

Sonic felt as if his whole head was afire, the heart of the inferno centered in his mouth. His headache was long forgotten in the face of this new pain--and indeed, no injury he had ever sustained could match this. "Well," he thought, "I probably DO have the cleanest teeth in the world now."

The worst part of his agony was not the pain--it was the sickening question of what had happened to his emerald belt. He had searched himself thoroughly before lying down, and it was indeed missing from his person. His whistle was gone, as well, but he knew well enough that it had been taken by his captors. He would not have been able to blow it if he HAD had it ... he felt queasy at the mere thought of cold metal on his front teeth.

He had no idea of how long he had laid there in the dimly-lit cell in torment, but suddenly his ears caught the sound of footsteps. He immediately pulled himself to a sitting position and waited. He had no wish for his enemies to gloat over his condition.

Pip the Bat stepped into view. In one hand she carried a plate with several objects on it, and in the other a keyring. "Hi," she said. "Is it okay if I come in?"

He nodded dumbly, unwilling to speak.

She unlocked the barred cell door--the sound of metal on metal set every nerve in his head to tingling--and stepped inside. She held the plate out to him and he took it. On it were two aspirin, a glass of water and his whistle.

He looked at her questioningly. She leaned against the door, folded her silver wings across her body and said, "I thought you might need something to kill the pain."

The hedgehog hurriedly gulped the medicine, shuddering at the cold water on his sensitive teeth, slipped the whistle around his neck and murmured, "Thanks."

She heard the unspoken question in his voice and said, "Sorry about this. I didn't know he was gonna torture you. The thing is, we have some painkiller out here--he didn't use it on purpose."

"He wanted my belt," Sonic muttered, moving his mouth as little as possible. "But it's gone. I don't know where it went." To himself he added regretfully, "Slash was right. I DO rely on that thing's power too much, and it failed me."

Pip looked down. "Sorry about that," she said quietly. "I took it."

Sonic's head shot up, eyes suddenly flaming. "WHAT?"

"Calm down," she said, waving a hand. "I stole it last night while you were asleep."

"Did you give it to R.K.?"

"No. He didn't even know I had it."

Sonic bristled in indignation. "So you let him do this to me, and all the time you knew I didn't have my belt?"

Pip looked uneasy. "I didn't know he wanted it. I thought he would ask you about Knothole or the chaos emeralds or something."

"I'll bet you knew." Sonic leaned back against the cold wall and glared at her, tasting blood from his bruised gums.

The bat looked at the floor for a moment remorsefully and murmured, "He's not going to let you go. He said something about holding you prisoner indefinitely."

No surprise. Sonic had never expected to be released--he knew too much about how his enemies operated. He said nothing.

Pip looked at him. "I don't want to see him hurt you no more. Do you think you could trust me enough to let me help you escape?"

Now THAT was a surprise. Sonic's eyebrows lifted. "Are you serious? You stole my belt and helped Robo Knux kidnap me! Why should I trust you?" The aspirin was taking effect and his rage was rising to the surface again.

Pip glanced out into the passage, found it empty and replied, "Because I am the only one you CAN trust."



"Okay," said Sonic. "Say you can get me out of the complex. How're you gonna smuggle me by R.K.?"

"We'll have to cross that bridge when we come to it. Do any of your friends know where you are?"

"Yeah. Slasher." An idea came to Sonic the second he spoke the name. He took the whistle from around his neck and held it out to the bat. She took it and looked at him quizzically. "You don't want it anymore?"

"Heck yeah, I do! Listen, I've got an idea. Take it out in the woods and blow it five times, then wait where you are until Slasher comes. Tell her what's going on. She'll help you work something out."

Pip held the whistle as if it were a wasp, staring at him. "Who is Slasher?"

"A friend. Now just do it, before R.K. does something really nasty to me."

Pip gazed at him for a second longer, sensing there was something he was not telling her, then turned and exited the cell, locking the door behind her.

She put the whistle in a pocket in the inside of her wing so her employer would not see it, then set out through the fortress. Most of it was built in an old iron mine that had been burrowed far back in the mountain. Only in these last few years had Robo Knux discovered it and converted it to his secret base. Unlike Mecha Sonic, his predecessor, he had no quarrel with the environment around him; using things like abandoned mines and pristine forests to shield him from prying eyes.

Pip was not exactly afraid of Robo Knux, but there were times he scared her--with a glance or a motion, perhaps. He was always nice to her outwardly, but there was something cold behind it. She was thinking of this as she passed by the closed door that led to the robot's private chamber, so it was a bit odd when the door opened right as she passed it. The robot himself stood there. "Pip," he said as she turned to face him, "I have a question."

"What?" she asked, hoping he couldn't read the treachery in her mind.

"What is this?" Robo Knux asked, holding out his two empty hands.

She looked and shook her head. "Your claws?"

"No, I mean this." He made a queer gesture, as if he were untying a string, and suddenly Sonic's emerald belt became visible. Again he held it out for her to examine.

Pip shook her head once more. "I don't know. What is it?"

"Hmm, I thought you might know, as I found it in your room."

She looked up with a start to find the green eyes burning into her

own. "YOU should have been the one I interrogated," he growled.

Ten minutes later found Pip and Sonic again together, but this time as inmates.

"What'd you DO?" Sonic asked her in disgust.

Pip slumped against the rough stone wall. "He found the belt." She slapped her forehead. "I'm so dumb! I thought because it was cloaked he wouldn't see it!"

"Never underestimate the enemy," Sonic muttered dryly. "Did he take the whistle?"

"No." Pip reached into her pocket and pulled it out. "Here it is."

"Thanks. Cover your ears."

"Why?"

"I'm gonna blow it anyway. Slash swears up and down she can hear it no matter where I am. So cover your ears." He drew a deep breath and began to blow.

\* \* \*

Miles away in Knothole, Slasher's head jerked up and cocked this way and that. The ghost of each whistle blast reached her ears, so faint it was almost as if she did not hear it at all, but imagined it. It seemed to her that each note was muffled, as if underground. Five blasts.

The big raptor informed Sally that she must leave at once, and was in the sky within three minutes.

\* \* \*

Sonic and Pip sat in the cell without speaking, staring out the mouth of the cell at the far wall. The light was dim in the outer passage, and they could hear the generators rumbling somewhere in the distance.

Abruptly Pip said, "How long before your friend gets here?"

Sonic shrugged without looking at her. "I guess about an hour for the flight, but finding a way in here may take longer."

"How will she know where we are?"

"She'll know." Sonic said nothing more. The asprin and inactivity had made him sleepy, and he didn't feel like talking much.

Pip, however, was restless. After a moment she rose and paced, examining every nook and cranny of the empty cell. Finding nothing, she moved to the entrance and shook each bar in turn. All were solid. Discouraged, she returned to her seat beside Sonic. He had watched the entire performance without a word or interest. "We're trapped," she told him simply. He nodded. "You didn't think R.K. would leave any weak areas, did you?"

Suddenly, from far off, there came a muffled bang. The light flickered slightly and the stone beneath them vibrated. The two prisoners leaped to their feet, startled. "What was that?" Sonic began, but Pip shushed him and cocked her head, listening intently. Being a bat, her hearing was very keen, even more so than Tails's. Sounds reached her ears that barely brushed Sonic's--the sound of falling rock, of something metal clawing against loose stones, and of something else; a fine hum, like an electric wire.

Sonic watched her face, trying to guess what she heard. Presently he whispered, "What is it?"

Pip had gone pale and her dark eyes widened. "Can you break us out of here?"

The hedgehog stared at her. "You've got to be kidding. You just said there's no way we can escape!"

"We've got to get outta here," Pip insisted, obviously frightened, which was rare. "Robo Knux just became hyper."

\* \* \*

The robot was extremely proud of himself. About his chest was Sonic's emerald belt, invisible but for the shining stars that were the super emeralds. His red hull sparkled and shimmered with electricity. His entire system was on a power surge, making him incredibly strong.

Activating the emeralds had been a bit tricky, and when he finally succeeded, the force of the power surge had flung him into the ceiling. Half the cave had collapsed on him in return, but with his invincibility and strength was able to dig himself out. Now he stood in the passage, glowing hot red and unhurt, his green eyes so bright they were almost yellow. He must show himself off to someone. Once his pride had been satisfied he could go out and attack someone--perhaps that annoying Knothole village.

At any rate, Sonic would be impressed.

Robo Knux set off at a tremendous pace through the tunnels, his rockets boosted to afterburner speed. "I am COOL," he told himself conceitedly, and threw out his metal chest.

But a disappointment awaited him in the cell block. He glided up to the cell that housed his prisoners, opened the gate and strode in ... only to find it empty.

Confusion turned to fury in an instant. How could they have escaped? Worse yet, he could not show himself off before them. As he stormed out of the cell block in rage, another thought entered his crafty computer mind that calmed him at once. If he could not gloat over himself to Pip and Sonic, then he would make himself a creature of terror to them; a glowing ghost who could electrocute with a touch.

Pleased with this scheme, he set off in search of them.

\* \* \*

Six feet above the floor of the cell, almost invisible in the shadows, hung Pip and Sonic. Pip was clinging to the rough ceiling by her feet, arms wrapped around Sonic, who was clinging to her in desperation, also hanging head-down. They had dangled in silent apprehension as the glowing robot had walked in and looked about, but fortunately did not look up. Now, as his footsteps faded away down the tunnel, both gave a deep sigh of relief, and Pip let Sonic down onto the floor. He sidled up to the open cell door and peered out. The robot was gone and not a sound could be heard but the hum of the generators.

Sonic shivered and whispered, "It's clear as far as I can see."

"Which isn't far," Pip said, dropping from the roof and coming to stand beside him. She too listened, but she could hear nothing either. "Well," she said, biting her lower lip, "here goes nothing."

She stepped out and tiptoed down the hall, Sonic following, tense as a drawn bow. Both knew that the robot was ruthless and unpredictable, but now he was invincible into the bargain. Somehow they had to get out of there.

They came to the next tunnel that intersected their own. Pip hesitated, looking this way and that.

"Which way?" Sonic whispered.

"I'm not sure," she replied softly. "We could try to get out the main entrance, but he's sure to be guarding it. There's supposed to be another spot where the mine opens into the woods, but I'm not sure if it's still there ..."

"Pick one," Sonic pushed nervously. "We can't stand here forever."

"When I'm right no one remembers," Pip murmured to herself, "and when I'm wrong no one forgets."

"We'll be dead either way," Sonic growled.

"Main entrance," Pip said.

They set out down the left-hand passage, walking quietly and trying to listen. Pip's ears kept flicking back and forth as she searched for that fine hum the robot now emitted, but she heard nothing. The compound was dead silent except for the generators. He was out there, somewhere, lurking just out of hearing ...

They took several turns and the passage began to slope upward. Pip seemed to relax and walked faster, but Sonic could not calm his racing heart. He had been in situations like this before. He looked about them constantly, especially behind them. It was too easy. Robo Knux was just playing with them.

Pip made a hissing sound through her teeth, grabbed Sonic's arms and pulled him to one side. He found himself in the mouth of a passage, blocked off with a large wooden gate. The opening was only a few feet

deep, affording little shelter. They stood still for a moment. After an interval of nothing happening, Sonic's curiosity got the better of him, and he risked a glance up and down the tunnel. To his surprise, at one end was the round, white room with the big metal doors. He leaned back into their little alcove and breathed, "I can see the entrance from here. We can make it if we run."

"No," Pip whispered back, ears pricked as high as they would go. "We can't."

"Why not?" Sonic demanded in a whisper.

Pip touched a finger to her lips. "Because we're being hunted."

The hedgehog drew a deep breath and held it, listening. Was it his imagination, or did he hear a distant electronic hum, almost drowned by the generators? He looked at Pip, who nodded. Neither spoke. They could go nowhere to escape from the robot ...

... or could they?

Sonic turned and looked through the slats in the gate to their backs. The passage beyond was partially filled with rubble, but there was more than enough room for someone to walk by and travel deeper into the mine.

"Does this open?" Sonic whispered, tugging at the gate.

Pip turned and looked, and immediately the same idea occurred to her. "No," she returned, stepping over to a spot where the boards were criss-crossed. She lifted this up, and Sonic saw it had been a patch on a gap in the fence, but now hung by one rusty nail. The hole beneath was more than large enough for them to crawl through.

He ducked through, then propped it open so Pip could follow. They let it fall to behind them--the slap was terribly loud to their high-strung ears--and scurried down the musty passage, stepping over and around rotten beams and rocks. After fifteen feet it opened out into a wide, low-ceilinged passage that led away into darkness. Pip took Sonic's hand and led him fearlessly into it; she could see in the dark like a cat. They went along for a moment, stooping to avoid the ceiling. "Where are we?" Sonic finally dared to ask.

"The old mine," Pip replied. "I've explored this bit before and it's pretty safe. Just don't go down the west passage. It collapsed into another section below it, and it's full of holes and pits."

"Why would we go down there?"

"We won't. I was just letting you know."

By this time the darkness was complete and Sonic could see absolutely nothing. The echoes were uncanny--they sounded as if a thousand SWAT-bots were after them, and were strangely disorienting. He thought to himself that he couldn't tell where he was if his life depended on it. If he became separated from Pip he was a goner.

Presently his guide stopped and pulled him to one side. His outstretched hands made out the shallow depression in the wall and

floor, and he crouched beside her. Now that they were still the echoes died away and the silence of an abandoned mine settled about them. Even the noise of the generators was gone. "Let's sit here for a while and listen," Pip said softly. "He may come looking for us."

The seconds ticked into minutes, and the minutes crept past like hours. Sonic shook his head and opened his eyes wide, but could see nothing. It was as if he had gone blind. Often he would see flickers of light and jump, imagining it was the robot, but it was only the nerves in his eyes playing tricks on him. Gradually these died away. There was nothing to see whatsoever. In return, he found his other senses sharpened; he could hear Pip breathing beside him, and far away the drip of water on water, or occasionally the creak of a tired wooden support beam.

Pip's eyes could still see. They were in a dim world of shadow, the walls and floor reflecting enough light for her to see by. However, if they went about ten feet farther, she would be forced to navigate with echo-location, her built-in radar. She was comfortable in caves and darkness held no terror for her. But from the sound of Sonic's ragged breathing beside her, she could tell he was slowly panicking; he could not stand the dark for long without at least moving about. She put a hand on his to reassure him and felt him jump and settle back. He was shivering slightly.

Almost at the same time their ears caught the soft electronic hum, like an electro-magnet. Both heads turned and both pairs of eyes made out the dim reflection of light on the stone walls. Possibly Robo Knux was standing at the gate. They listened in growing apprehension as the wooden patch slapped as someone let it fall to behind them. The light on the tunnel walls brightened and the hum grew louder.

Pip's hand slipped into Sonic's and she breathed, "Run straight ahead when I say."

Sonic squeezed her hand to acknowledge and pulled his feet under him. They waited. The light grew still brighter, the hum like an ominous bee. Sonic's muscles tightened--any second now--

"Go!"

He broke from the hollow like a racehorse from a starting gate, towing Pip by the hand. They shot across the broad tunnel and into another on the far side. The hum and light enlarged behind. A shout, amplified by their fear--"Aha!"

"Run, run!" Pip urged in his ear, but Sonic needed no urging. He was fleeing blindly, randomly, through the inky blackness, a deadly foe at his heels.

"Bear left!" Pip cried, her voice echoing off the walls. Sonic did, but because he had no focal point, he turned too far and smacked into the wall. He reeled backward, stars and lights flickering before his eyes. Pip steadied him and led him on, emitting faint, high-pitched clicks that served as her vision. Staggering, Sonic glanced back. He could see a bright light reflecting off the stone a hundred feet distant, Robo Knux himself hidden from view by a bend in the passage.

Suddenly Pip came to a halt, panting between clicks.

"What's up?" Sonic asked, holding his head with one hand.

The clicks stopped and her voice replied, "Fork in the tunnel. I THINK we go right ... or is it the next one?"

"Hurry up!"

"Trust me, Sonic. Pip is good, Pip is wise."

"Pip is gonna be robot-kill in a minute."

"Let's go right."

They had gone little more than fifteen feet when the bat groaned, "Oh heck! This leads to the west passage. I forgot." They turned to retrace their steps, only to find their way blocked by a brilliant figure with blazing green eyes. The light hurt their eyes and they fled from him, dazzled.

"We're trapped!" Sonic exclaimed to his guide, now blinder than ever and aware of the scream of overloaded engines behind them.

"Like rats," Pip agreed. "Small little rats with no hair and one leg."

"What do we do?"

"What else? We run."

They ran. Sonic longed to pour on the speed and leave the robot miles behind, but as he could not see he was limited to Pip's slow pace. To make it worse, Robo Knux was dogging their heels at a leisurely pace.

Suddenly Pip set her brakes and yanked Sonic hard to one side. Robo Knux was near enough to shed enough light to see by, and the hedgehog made out the gaping chasm in the ground ahead. He stumbled and stopped on the brink, nearly tumbling in. They could go no further.

The hedgehog and bat turned to face the belligerent robot, who was pacing toward them like a lion sure of its prey. For the first time they had a good look at him. His hull sparkled and glowed like the red chaos emerald, seemingly lit from within. His eyes seemed as black as the cave about them, and his pupils stood out against it like lime-green headlights. He stopped a short distance away from them and gave an evil digital chuckle. "I have you now," he grinned. "But before I kill you, I want to show you how cool I am."

He turned around several times to let them observe his transfigured hull, then drove a fist into the wall to demonstrate how strong he was. Sonic remarked later that he was surprised the robot did not flex his arms to show off his biceps.

While Robo Knux was prancing and bragging on himself, Sonic risked a glance over his shoulder at the dark chasm. How deep was it? Could it be crossed? But his eyes could make out little, for when he looked

away from the robot all he could see were bright spots and patches before his eyes.

Pip did not cow so easily. She had already figured the width and depth of the hole by her echo-location. It was forty feet deep with an uneven, rocky bottom, and thirty feet across. If R.K. would let his guard down for a moment she could grab Sonic and fly him over. But for now, they had better play along with the conceited robot. She applauded as if watching a circus and cheered, "Bravo! Very good, R.K.! Can you fly faster, too?"

"Very fast," Robo Knux replied with cool glee. "I have not yet clocked myself, but my best estimates of acceleration are something like zero to three hundred in two seconds."

"Cool! So you could run from here, to the main passage and back in five seconds?"

"Probably. Would you like to see?"

"Sure!"

The glowing red robot whirled and fled away down the tunnel, leaving behind darkness, the smell of hot metal and exhaust. "Quick," Pip said, whirling and grabbing Sonic's hands. "Hold on. I'm getting us out of here."

To the hedgehog's surprise there was a whir of engines and Pip lifted him off his feet and forward, across the pit. For a long second Sonic saw nothing but cave-dark, felt nothing but Pip's hold on his hands, heard nothing but the booster jets in her wings. Then his feet touched down and Pip let him go. He stood stock still, waiting for her to lead him on again. The jet sound shut off and the bat's metal hand found his. "C'mon," she said. "He's coming back."

The blind running resumed, as did the faint clicks. Sonic glanced back and saw the rapidly growing light of the approaching robot on the far side of the pit; then they turned a corner and he was hidden from view.

There came an outraged yell, then the roar of jets. "Here he comes," Sonic said.

"I know," Pip replied, tossing a long look over her shoulder.

Suddenly the ground beneath their feet sloped sharply downward. "Whoa!" they exclaimed, trying to stop. Their feet skidded on the gravel slope. They fell hard and slid down, faster and faster. The mine amplified the noise of panting breath, slipping feet and grinding gravel to a nearly deafening volume.

Then they were falling through empty space. Sonic automatically curled himself into a hard ball, releasing Pip's hand. They were floating, surrounded by small rocks, space and deafening silence--

Whump.

Sonic's senses righted themselves and found himself lying on cold,



loose rock that rattled when he moved. Slowly he sat up. The air was cool and smelled of dark water and cave slime. The stone about him was slick with mud. "Pip?" he whispered, thinking uncomfortably of Lava Reef. "Pip, where are you?"

"Here," came the reply from somewhere to his right. "I think I'm okay. What about you?"

"Just bruised, I think. Where are we?"

Their voices grew from whispers to normal, as hearing anything above a whisper in the enormous silence was comforting.

Pip clicked a few times. "Looks like we're in another mineshaft. The one up there fell through--oh, ages ago."

"Can we get out?"

"Are you kidding? It must have been fifty feet straight down, and I can't fly straight up."

"No--through the mine."

"Oh." A pause. "I donno. I've never been here."

"What about Robo Knux?" Sonic inquired, his voice apprehensive.

"Robo Knux," Pip said in disgust. "He really IS in love with himself. I thought it was just a summer thing ... you know, I've always wanted to say that."

"Uh-huh, right. But where IS mister-in-love-with-himself?"

"Kicking around up there." Sonic heard her stand up and did the same. "Probably trying to figure out where we went."

"Funny, but I've been pondering that same question." The hedgehog extended his hands and felt about him. There were no walls within touching distance. "Pip, where are you?"

"Over here. Hang on--I can see you." The sounds of sneakers slipping and clinking over loose stones, and the soft clicks.

"How can you see me?" Sonic exclaimed, although he knew she was using her radar. It aroused a sort of irritated jealousy; he was bigger and stronger than she was, and he was forced to rely on her guidance.

Her hand closed on his and she said, "Don't tell me I need to run down the list of basic bat abilities for you."

"No," he said resignedly. "Can you find a way out of this hole?"

"Maybe," Pip replied uncertainly. "Like I said, I stay out of the west passage. Maybe, though, if we head west we'll find the old entrance. Um--" She paused. "Which way is west?"

"The only way I can tell west from my left elbow," Sonic said

sarcastically, "is because one of them itches." It sounded nastier than he meant it to.

Pip replied in a hurt tone, "Look, if you want to stay right here while I scout around ..."

"No, I take it back. Sorry." He still sounded sulky to himself, but at least it was better than sounding scared and claustrophobic, as he felt at the moment.

"No use standing around arguing," she said. By the sound of her voice she was turning her head this way and that. "C'mon, let's get rolling."

The quiet clicks resumed and the pair began walking. Sonic kept his free hand at eye level so as not to crack his head on something. After a few feet he touched a wall and a wooden strut. A low passage. "Duck," Pip told him, and led him in. Sonic was tempted to ask, "Where?" but thought better of it.

The tunnel was cramped and low-ceilinged, and the two were forced to go along half-stooped. The floor was rough and uneven with stone and dirt that had fallen from the walls and roof over the years. Sonic stumbled often, envying Pip's radar.

It was a silent maze. They passed from low shaft to tall cavern and back again, winding this way and that as Pip explored. Several times she remarked upon things Sonic wished he could see-- "Wow, look at that machine. I wonder that it did? -- Ooo, can't go that way. Tunnel's collapsed. -- Oh, a skeleton!"

Gradually, as the hours passed, their strength drained away, their necks and backs aching and cramped from constantly stooping. Sonic had tripped so many times his ankles were bundles of pain, and he had long since ceased to complain; complaining took too much energy. Pip, too, was weary. At long last she stopped and said, "How about a rest?"

Sonic sank down on the uneven ground without a word and closed his eyes. Pip lay down beside him and covered herself with her wings. Both were asleep in moments.

Far above them, the outside world had darkened to deep night and stars burned down like white eyes. It was late.

The two wanderers slept the night away without awakening once, so complete was their weariness. Toward morning (unseen inside the mines) there came a snorting, snuffling sound, almost too soft to hear. One of Pip's ears flicked, but she did not awaken. After a little the sound stopped and was replaced by an ominous electronic hum.

That sound DID awaken Pip. She awoke with a gasp and sat up, ears pricked. It was the robot, all right, and he was not far away. She turned to Sonic and shook him, whispering, "Sonic, it's R.K.! He's after us again!" The hedgehog sat up and said loudly, "Yeah Sally, I'm coming." Then he awoke to find Pip shaking him and hissing, "Snap out of it! R.K.'ll hear!"

"Robo Knux?" he whispered. Forgetting where he was, he leaped to his

feet and bashed into the low ceiling.

"Watch your head," Pip said softly, standing up.

"Thanks a lot," Sonic whispered back furiously, holding the top of his head.

The hum was growing louder now, and their light-depraved eyes caught a distant glimmer on the rocky walls. "Let's go," Pip exclaimed, grabbing Sonic's hand.

They scurried into the darkness like cockroaches fleeing a light. Behind them was no sound but that hum, as if Robo Knux was floating without touching the ground. "We'll never get away," Sonic whispered hoarsely. "He's got his scanners to show him where he is. He probably knows every passage!"

"If only we could hide," Pip said between clicks. "I'll keep an ear out for some place."

A hiding place presented itself unexpectedly. Sonic's feet, stumbling along blindly, encountered a rotten board leaning at an angle against the wall. He struck it and fell sprawling, knocking it out of its place. With a rush of falling debris and splintering boards, the ceiling proceeded to collapse.

Sonic was saved only because Pip, who was still clinging to his hand, yanked him out of the way and dragged him to safety. He scrambled to his feet as the noise of destruction quieted. The air was heavy with the taste and smell of dust.

Light blazed upon them without warning. The two whirled to face it and found themselves looking at Robo Knux through a narrow space between the debris and the roof. His glowing hull illuminated the vast hole in the ceiling and the huge amount of junk that all but filled the tunnel. The now-visible air was thick and swirling with dust. Pip saluted half-mockingly. "Hail and well met!"

"Fool," the robot spat, his digital voice echoing off the walls. "You are trapped. You will starve to death."

"Hey," Sonic said haughtily. "This isn't The Cask of Amontillado. There's still a ton of room back here."

"Yes, Hedgehog? I suggest you go and investigate for yourself how far back it goes."

Pip and Sonic looked at each other in the reddish light, noticing how dirty the other's face was. Then they joined hands and trotted into the darkness at the rear of the passage.

Before they had even outdistanced Robo Knux's glow, Pip stopped dead and pulled Sonic up as well. "Great," she whispered furiously.

"Wonderful," Sonic added in consternation.

The passage ended as if cut with a knife. Beyond it was a huge void. No floor, walls or ceiling. Pip clicked for a moment, and Sonic tossed in a pebble. The floor was a vast distance downward; at least

two hundred feet. Pip discovered that the walls and roof were at least as far apart, and the far wall was featureless.

"I'm not limping back to say we're whipped," Sonic murmured furiously to his companion. "He'll laugh. I can't stand laughing robots."

Pip looked out the dark cavern, then back at the blocked passage and their enemy beyond it. "Things could be worse, you know."

Sonic, who was hungry, discouraged and cynical at the moment, said, "How?"

"How what?" Pip responded absently.

"How could they be worse?"

She looked at him expressionlessly. "They couldn't. I lied."

"What did I say?" came the robot's voice from behind them. "You are beaten and cannot escape me." He then proceeded to laugh while Sonic ground his teeth in loathing. "You may as well come back over here," Robo Knux said. "You cannot get out of hearing range. I plan to remain here as long as you are alive."

Sonic stalked toward the mound of debris, Pip, for once, trailing behind. "Why don't you give us a fair chance and attack us? Then, at least, we could go down fighting!" His eyes, dark with his ferocity, met the brilliant green pupils of his captor. They were wavering as if underwater, and the hedgehog quickly looked away, for the robot could hypnotize a victim who looked for too long.

"A fair fight?" Robo Knux asked coolly. "I am hyper. You are hopelessly overpowered. I can kill you simply by touching you." Suddenly his voice lost its clarity and dropped to a guttural buzz. It returned almost at once.

"What's the matter?" Sonic asked mockingly. "Get something stuck in your throat?"

The robot appeared not to have heard him. "I will stand here and watch you as thirst overwhelms you and you beg me for mercy. But mercy is for the weak ... I show no mercy."

Sonic turned away from him in disgust. Pip was standing at his elbow, not saying anything, which was unusual. He took her arm and led her to the far end of the tunnel, next to the open void. "What?" she asked him.

"What do we do?" he asked softly so the robot wouldn't hear.

The bat sat down on the cold floor and stared out into the dark room. "I donno."

"You don't know?" Sonic exclaimed. "You mean we're just supposed to sit here until we starve to death?"

Pip looked at him and motioned for him to sit down. When he refused, she whispered, "We're not gonna die. Sit down!"

He did so, sulkily. "You got a plan or something?"

"Shh, not so loud. No. We just need to wait. He can't last much longer."

"What do you mean?"

"You heard his voice just now. Nobody can last on a power surge forever. Sooner or later he'll burn out and we'll be free."

"You sure?" Sonic asked dubiously.

Pip nodded with a small, mischievous smile.

But it seemed for a long while that Robo Knux would outlast them. He stood and stared at them through the gap in the rubble without a sound but the hum of his power core. Pip curled up in a comfortable niche in the floor and seemed to sleep, but Sonic was painfully alert. He paced, impatient and worried, wishing he were out and running instead of here, trapped and helpless. He knew all too well what extreme thirst was like, what it was like to starve and suffer underground. He examined his twenty-foot prison inch by inch. He studied the gap in the roofing material by Robo Knux's light and decided that he and Pip could squirm out. He threw rocks into the monstrous cavern and listened idly to the sounds they made. In general, he amused himself as much as he was able, trying to ignore the robot's sleepless eyes that followed his every move.

At last he sat down beside Pip and leaned against the cold wall. She stirred in the dim light and looked at him.

"Here's lookin' at you, kid," he muttered.

"You've been pacing like a caged animal, ha ha," she replied, sitting up. "Find anything?"

Sonic shook his head, his face showing he had all but given up.

Pip was oddly cheerful. "Don't worry. We'll be out of here soon."

"Right."

"Really. Sit still and listen for a while."

There was nothing else to do. The hedgehog closed his eyes, opened his ears and relaxed resignedly.

He did not hear it right away. It took a little time to sort out all the tiny sounds--Robo Knux's hum, Pip's soft breathing, a distant drip of water, the faint ringing in his ears and the beating of his heart. The minutes ticked by. Gradually he became aware of yet another sound--a shuffling, ticking sound, like mice. It was very far away and so soft he thought he imagined it. But it went on, steady, constant, like running water. He opened his eyes and glanced questioningly at his companion. She was watching him and lifted her eyebrows as if to say, "See?"

It seemed to be coming from the passage beyond Robo Knux's back. They two turned and gazed toward him curiously. He stared back impassively, head and shoulders visible through the gap.

Suddenly there came a loud cry, ringing off the walls and subsiding into countless echoes. Sonic and Pip gasped, and the robot whirled about and faced into the mine. "What is it?" Pip whispered.

Sonic was grinning broadly and leaped to his feet. "It's Slasher!" he whispered back. "She came! I don't believe it!" The sound had been the raptor's own spacial call to her friends.

Slasher's voice came floating through the gap. "Ho, Robo Knux! Catch!"

They saw Robo Knux step forward, as if catching an object tossed to him. "A chaos emerald!" he exclaimed in a voice like thunder. Then, in quite another tone, he screeched, "No! I have forgotten! No! Take it awaaaayy!"

Sonic threw Pip to the floor and knelt over her as something akin to an explosion rocked the cave. Rocks flew about like super balls, and the light from the robot grew very bright, then flickered out, drowning the cave suddenly in darkness. There came a dying digital shriek from the robot, then silence fell.

It was not quiet long. There came the faint sound of claws on stone floor, then a colored light shown into their prison. Sonic, crouched over Pip with his arms over her head, slowly looked up, toward the light. There stood Slasher. On one hand she held the emerald belt with it's seven glowing jewels.

"Slash!" he exclaimed, jumping up and pulling Pip to her feet.

"Are you okay?" she called as they ran up to the rock pile.

"I am," Sonic said, looking at Pip. "You're fine, right?"

"Uh-huh," she said, eyes fixed on the velociraptor. "Slasher's a dinosaur?"

"Yup," Slasher replied. "R.K. busted the hole wide open. You should be able to climb right out.

Sure enough, the robot's convulsions had gouged a hole in the heap of debris. Sonic and Pip scrambled through without much trouble.

Once out, they immediately saw Robo Knux. He was lying crumpled and stiff on the floor, among litter he had knocked from the walls and ceiling. His hull was no longer red--all the paint had seared off, leaving him a dull metallic grey. All around his afterburner and dreadlocks it was burned black. Smoke was still leaking from his engines and rising, foul and thick, to mingle with the dust in the air.

"Eww, what happened to him?" Pip asked, staring.

Sonic shrugged, not paying attention; he was strapping his emerald belt about his waist and had eyes for little else.

Slasher put a hand on the bat's shoulder and explained, "He scorched off all his paint himself; he was hyper too long. And as for what happened--" She reached down and pulled a glowing blue stone from the

rubble around the robot. "This is our chaos emerald," she said, tossing it lightly up and down. "It killed Mecha Sonic, and it killed Robo Knuckles. Chaos emeralds have a drastically negative effect on machinery. When Robo Knux touched it, it was just enough to fry him. By the way, what's your name?"

"Pip the bat," Pip replied. Somehow she sensed that this creature would not harm her.

The big raptor turned to Sonic. "You gonna haul us outta here?"

"Sure, why not?" Sonic grinned. Slasher handed him the chaos emerald, and they all joined hands.

Pip looked around uncomprehendingly. "What's up? What are we doing?"

"Teleporting," Sonic said simply. "Hold on." He touched the blue emerald to the stones in his belt.

In a trice, Robo Knux was alone in the mine shaft.

\* \* \*

"... and we warped right out of there, into the woods. Pip didn't like it; you should have seen her face! I sponse it takes a while to get used to. I asked Slash how in the world she found us. She wrote this next part."

"Slasher here. I had been carrying the blue chaos emerald the day I heard Sonic's whistle. Frankly, I didn't even remember it until I realized that they had went straight into the abandoned part of the mine. (Nevermind how I got into the outpost. Let's just say that electronic locks leave a lot to be desired.) Then I used the emerald for light. I trailed Sonic (and Pip, although I didn't know who she was) all the way up to the big sink-hole they fell in.

"There I was forced to stop, because Robo Knux came snooping about and I had no intention of incriminating myself. I shadowed him while he chased the two. I nearly had a heart-attack when the tunnel caved in--I just knew Sonic and his friend had been crushed. Robo Knuckles thought so, too, for he froze for a second, then tore up the mound and looked through the gap. Fortunately, they had not been hurt. When I discovered they were trapped, I fell back to think and watch.

"It was doing this that I realized Robo Knux was burning himself out. He was too proud to admit it to himself and would never discharge of his own accord. I decided that if he touched the emerald I carried he would short out. And he did. He did a sort of external explosion--he bounced all over the tunnel like a chicken with it's head cut off before finally discharging."

Sonic: "And that about wraps it up, I guess. We're bringing Pip in with us, too. Look for us via Raptor Airlines around sunset. Peace out!

"Sonic."

\* \* \*

Sunset in the mountains. The sun briefly touched an old, abandoned mine shaft through the thick trees. From this shaft, long silent, now came a faint scrabbling and clanking. After a period of several minutes, a dull grey head appeared. A burned metal creature dragged itself into the open, one fist at a time-- it's legs would not work. It collapsed in exhaustion and lay face down on the forest floor as the sun sank beyond the mountain peaks.

If you had been very close by and listening carefully, you would have heard the soft muttered oath: "Sonic will pay for his part in this, and Pip will, too, for this humiliation."

The End?

End  
file.